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Lecturer at Southeastern Says That

JESUS WAS MISTAKEN

The denominational press announced the launching of the current school year at Southeastern Seminary with addresses by Dr. George Beasley-Murray.

Dr. Beasley-Murray, a British Baptist of note, holds that Jesus was in error regarding His second advent. He follows the notion (long current in certain circles of negative criticism) that Jesus mistakenly predicted that His final coming in glory would take place within that generation, or within the first century.

And yet, . . . Dr. Beasley-Murray is often regarded as a conservative. But such a viewpoint of Jesus' second coming is not only far from conservatism: it is not even the better type of liberalism. Some who have rejected the Bible as the authority have yet retained Christ as authority; but, according to this view of Jesus' teaching, He is not authority respecting His second coming. (Although, in teaching on this subject, Jesus solemnly declared: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away"—Matt. 24:35.)

In his book, *Jesus and the Future* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1954), he writes:

> "In no section of our study is courageous thinking more required than in this. . . . To agnostics the issue is simple: Jesus was wrong in his prophecies, he is therefore discredited. We recall that on this ground Sidgwick felt compelled to abandon Christian faith. Christian believers shrink from admitting that their Lord was mistaken in a major item of his preaching and not unnaturally cast about to see if there is any other explanation of the Gospel material. It will have become clear to the reader that the present writer inclines to conservative views; he freely admits that on this matter he hesitated long before capitulating before the facts. Yet facts they appear to be and the Christian must come to terms with them; to resist what appears to be truth is to deny the Lord in whose interests it is done" (p. 183).

Then, after reviewing certain passages of Scripture which he interprets as meaning that Jesus expected that His coming in glory would take place within a short time, Dr. Beasley-Murray continues:

> "What are we to make of this expectation? Does it mean that Jesus is discredited, at least as regards the content of his prophecies, if not in his other teaching? By no means. We remember that even Strauss saw that if the fundamental belief of Jesus, as to the existence of a spiritual realm beyond this, be granted, then the question of date could be accounted as a merely human mistake. Baldensperger in a similar strain wrote: 'This mistake is irrelevent, a purely formal one; it is not due to a lack in religious or moral consciousness . . . , but it is simply the objective proof that religious perfection does not include omniscience.' Everything we know about Jesus points to the naturalness of his believing in a speedy coming of the End. . . . The convictions, related as they are to our Lord's resurrection hope, were true, *the perspective mistaken,* but that is the least important element in them" (pp. 186-187).

James M. Bulman,
Editor

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"I was constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delieverd to the saints." Jude 3. (ASV.)

"Stand fast therefore in the Liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Galaians 5:1 (A.V.)

While attempting to represent this alleged "mistake" on the part of Jesus as of little consequence, Dr. Beasley-Murray clearly takes the position that a mistake was made — a mistake concerning what Dr. Beasley-Murray describes as "a major item" of our Lord's teaching.

Contrary to Dr. Beasley-Murray, we contend that, obviously, *if* Jesus were mistaken on such a major item (on, indeed, what was a vital phase of *the* major item of His teaching: that concerning the kingdom), then the consequences are tremendously serious respecting His authority in religious matters. In this contention, we are supported by the one who is perhaps the leading professor at Southeastern and the most competent Greek scholar within Southern Baptist ranks — Professor Edward A. McDowell.

In the past, we have criticized Dr. McDowell for his position as a witness in the famous Rocky Mount trial. And we stand by every word of criticism which we have made in this connection. But, also, we have had occasion to seek to defend Dr. McDowell against what we have regarded as unduely extreme strictures which have been made against him concerning the more general Christian doctrines—most notably as have been made by Mr. Noel Smith. In the particular matter which we are now considering, Dr. McDowell has sought to defend Jesus' authority in His teaching on the second coming; and in doing so he has clearly drawn out the consequences which would follow if Jesus were mistaken.

In his book, *Son of Man and Suffering Servant* (Broadman Press, 1944), Dr. McDowell says that if Matt. 24:34 (and parallel passages) is interpreted (as by Dr. Beasley-Murray) as meaning that Jesus actually predicted that the End would come within the generation in which He was living, **"we are compelled to admit . . . that Jesus made a grievous blunder in His prediction of His 'coming' immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem"** (in A.D. 70) — "in which case," Dr. McDowell adds, **"we are also compelled to admit that He was a thorough-going apocalyptist"** (or a deluded fanatic) (p. 118). But Dr. McDowell does not so interpret Matt. 24:34. He interprets the passage in harmony with Jesus' full authority in religion. He interprets the passage as referring to another event, the destruction of Jerusalem, described in the language of divine judgment. In support of Dr. McDowell's principle of interpretation, it is to be noted that Jesus constantly spoke in figurative language on a grand scale—speaking of "beams" in eyes and of mountains being transported into the sea; that He spoke in a manner where the surface meaning would easily be confusing —as in His reference to the temple being destroyed and raised within three days.

Whether or not one accept Dr. McDowell's particular explanation of Matt. 24-34, we do not see how one can resist his conclusion as to the fatal consequences which would follow if Jesus were actually in error. Indeed, we may go further. If Jesus did make "a grievous blunder" on such "a major item" of His teaching, does not the question arise as to His authority on other aspects of His teaching? If, out of enthusiasm over the coming of the kingdom, he erred so grievously as to its time (the prediction's already having been shown to have been wide of the mark by about 1900 years!), may He not, out of enthusiasm over the importance of men's entering the

kingdom, have also erred in His teaching on the necessity of repentance and regeneration for entering this kingdom? Furthermore, if He made so grievous a mistake in the realm of knowledge, does this consequence raise questions as to His perfection in the realm of action? If He did make mistakes in conduct, would not this remove Him from the unique position of Saviour and rather place Him in the category of those needing to be saved?

A very serious objection facing Dr. Beasley-Murray's position is the fact that Jesus Himself disclaimed to know the time of His coming in glory: "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mk. 13:32). This difficult passage of course raises questions as to the limitation of our Lord's knowledge while living amid the restraints of His earthly life. It may be remarked in this connection that one may not know everything and yet be free from error in what he does know. But what we are concerned to point out is that this passage rules out the position that Jesus believed and taught that the time of His coming in glory would come within that generation. This point is argued effectively by Dr. McDowell, who thus brings his knowledge of the Greek language to bear on Mark 13:32:

> "In Mark that part of Jesus' conversation dealing with things to come is ended very abruptly with this disclaimer of knowledge concerning 'that day or that hour.' In the Greek 'that day or that hour' is a very definite phrase . . . ., indicating that the day and hour referred to are set over in contrast with the days that are described immediately preceding this point. To render properly in English, we would say, 'But of *that* day or *that* hour knoweth no man,' etc. . . . Hence the reference is to a day or hour that was not under immediate discussion . . . " (pp. 119-120).

In other words, Dr. McDowell contends that the preceding reference to an event to take place within that "generation" is not concerned with the End, that Great Day — but that the time of "*that* day and *that* hour" is not known and is set in contrast to the time of the event of the preceding reference which is known.

Of course, explanations other than that given by Dr. McDowell may be suggested. Indeed, since there are several explanations that may be put forth (explanations consonant with the belief that our Lord truly gave to the disciples the words which the Father gave to Him—Jn. 17:8), it strikes us that one is acting rather presumptiously in charging our Lord with error in certain of these sayings of so difficult a nature. The point has been made by the noted Princeton scholar of several decades back, Dr. B. B. Warfield, who writes of how unjustified we would be in assuming error "in One who has never been convicted of error in anything else" (quoting here from William Sanday). He goes on to press the point:

> "We should be very sure that we know fully and precisely all that our Lord has declared about His return — its what and how and when—before we venture to suggest, even to our most intimate thought, that He has committed so gross an error as to its what and how and when as is so often assumed; especially as He has in the most solemn manner declared concerning precisely the words under consideration that heaven and earth shall pass away, but not His words" (*A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels,* ed. James Hastings, 1908, p. 615).

N. C. CONVENTION FACES ROCKY MOUNT ISSUE

by the Editor

Editor's Note: With apologies to our readers, we are presenting this story on the Nov., 1962, session of the N. C. Baptist State Convention, in reference to the question of church autonomy, much later than had been anticipated and promised.

It was Dickens, I believe, who said of a particular moment of world history, "It was the best of times—it was the worst of

times." The last session of the State Convention might be given such a two-sided characterization as respects the autonomy issue.

At least not since far back in 1955, the fortunes of the autonomy cause were never higher within the State Convention than during the November, 1962, session. What we had called "a new day for autonomy" had been brought into being by the 1961 session, when the convention appointed a committee to study the question, particularly in the light of the Rocky Mount incident, and to report the following year. Thus by official appointment, the Rocky Mount issue was scheduled for consideration when the messengers assembled in Raleigh in November of 1962. And I was permitted to bring before the body a presentation of my case which was considerably more extended than had been attempted on any previous occasion. My proposal received more support from the floor than at any time in recent years. Most important of all—there was an attitude expressed to me by so many of the messengers quite-different from the usual "cold-shoulder" which I had encountered in past years. As I chanced to come into personal contact with various ones here and there about the convention, I received so many tributes for the stand which I have made that I began to ponder the applicability of the Scriptural admonition, "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you"

All this just five years after I had been "thrown out" of that very same building for attempting to raise a question concerning autonomy!

However, in a sense the 1962 session marked the lowest point for the cause of autonomy yet—for never had the convention come out so emphatically in support of the court decision in the Rocky Mount case.

A Whirlpool of Confusion

Since the previous convention had overwhelmingly approved of having this matter reported on at the 1962 session, it was hoped that the committee's report would be printed in the state paper far enough ahead of time for the messengers to be informed of what was to be recommended (as is customary and proper, and as was the case with regard to the committee that had been appointed to report on the question of capital punishment). And it was also hoped that a definite place on the official program would be listed for the matter (as should have been done and as was done for the report on capital punishment). But not so. Something was printed in the *Biblical Recorder,* **but** in the issue that reached the messengers **after** the convention! On Sunday, two days before the convention, the report of the committee on autonomy was printed in the booklet giving the "Report of the General Board" — **but** this report was later disowned by the committee itself, and what the committee did present to the convention turned out to be **another** report!

One can well understand why the committee repudiated its first report. Of its several demerits, most noticeable was its being a conglomeration of contradictions. This I say in spite of the prominent names constituting the committee: Nane Starnes, George Simmons, James Potter, R. N. Simms, Jr., S. L. Stealey, C. B. Deane, and M. O. Owens, Jr.

The contradictory nature of this report was rather evident from the straight-forward account given by the Associated Press immediately following the report's release. As this news story stated, the report said that the autonomy of Baptist churches is "not endangered" by the Rocky Mount decision, and yet said, "We frankly admit that Dr. Bulman and others have had cause for question. The truth is that what has been, for most of us, an overriding Baptist principle, has been set aside, at least in part, by the courts."

I sought further to emphasize the contradictory nature of this report in some comments to the press the following day. Then, in view of the fact that no place had been made on the convention agenda for consideration of the report, I began plans for introducing the issue myself. I was informed by a newspaperman backstage that the word was being circulated that what had been issued was not supposed to be the committee's report, that by some kind of

"mistake" it had come to be printed along with the General Board's report.

On the night of the first day of the convention, I called for consideration of the report. Amid a parliamentary wrangle, when the propriety of thus introducing the report was being contested, Vice-President George Simmons, one of the committee members, got up and with a straight face told the messengers that what had been issued in the "Report of the General Board" was not the committee's report, that through some "inadvertence" it had been inserted. Typical of the reaction of some of the messengers was the remark made in private afterwards by a well-known Charlotte minister, the Rev. Raymond Long, who said of this alleged "inadvertence" in my hearing, "How asinine can you get?"

Upon being assured openly by certain of the convention officials that this matter would be brought before the body at a specified time the following morning, I withdrew from the floor at that night session. When that scheduled time arrived the following morning, other matters were being handled then; and, since no effort was evidently forthcoming on the part of those officially entrusted with the responsibility of presenting the committee's report, I began planning to introduce the issue myself. Then a certain lesser-light of the convention confronted me backstage and said that "it had been agreed" that the autonomy matter was not "supposed" to come up at that time. I told him that the convention had openly and officially been informed the previous night that it was supposed to come up then; whereupon I made my way out to the platform and—in keeping with the convention's rules of order—called for consideration for the matter that had been scheduled for that time.

The presiding officer, the Rev. Nane Starnes, yielded to this obviously-justifiable request on my part. The floor was given to the committee chairman, the Rev. M. O. Owens, Jr., who took a position completely the opposite of his stand of a year before in presenting the committee's report, report number two—offered on the spur of the moment as a replacement of the report which had "inadvertently" been inserted in the official "Report of the General Board." Report number two was essentially the same as the main part of number one, minus the obvious contradictions. It was a clear endorsement of tne N. C. Supreme Court decision on the Rocky Mount case — all done, of course, in the name of being in keeping with the principle of autonomy: for at least things have long before reached the stage where it is not permissible to come right out and denounce "autonomy" as such.

Following Mr. Owens' motion for the adoption of that report, I offered as a substitute motion the replacement of the committee's report by a statement of my own. In my statement, I called for a repudiation of the court decision in the Rocky Mount case. In this I was supported from the floor by the Rev. Rogers Chenault. No one came forth to offer an answer for what I argued, in what was the most extended presentation of my case that I had ever attempted on the floor of any convention. However, the situation was regarded as serious enough for even the presiding officer, President Starnes himself (a committee member!), to suggest to the messengers—and while still in his capacity as presiding officer (clearly contrary to the rules of order as to the neutrality of the presiding officer)—how they should vote!

The New "Anti-Autonomy" Men

The convention as a whole, of course, must be charged with the responsibility of adopting the committee's report, which affirmed the decision of the courts in overthrowing majority rule in the North Rocky Mount Baptist Church and in thus depriving all Baptist churches in the state, *de jure,* of their autonomy. But the convention has long since adopted the pattern of "follow the leaders"—so much so that unless the ruling circle is opposed by somebody of recognized denominational stature, practically anything officially proposed will be adopted. In a special sense, blame must be placed on those composing the committee that recommended this "anti-autonomy" report. We have said much in the past about the position taken by the five witnesses in the Rocky Mount trial: Tribble, Barnes, Branch, Huggins, and McDowell.

Apart from the fact that testimony under oath was not involved at the recent convention (although, as a supposedly solemn conclave held before the eyes of God and man, what was offered as a statement of Baptist principle should have been regarded just as seriously as testimony in court), the position of the men on the committee must be regarded as just as reprehensible, from the Baptist viewpoint, as that of those who testified for the minority in the Rocky Mount trial. Of those who testified at Rocky Mount, Barnes and Branch have been removed from this earthly scene, and Huggins has been relieved of his high official position and is now a relatively obscure figure; while Tribble and McDowell have long been silent, at least publicly, on the question of autonomy. Their place, as the leading opponents of autonomy within Baptist ranks, may be said to have been taken by the following: Nane Starnes, George Simmons, James Potter, R. N. Simms, Jr., S. L. Stealey, D. B. Deane, and M. O. Owens, Jr. Most disgusting of all is the fact that Owens (a supposed conservative!), **chairman** of the committee, has so completely reversed himself from the position which he took before the convention in 1961. We had hoped that in Owens we had found a man of stature who would put Baptist principle above the pressures of the denominational machinery.

Unexpected Support

At noon, following Wednesday morning's session when the committee's report was adopted, I stood alone for a moment downtown, when one whom I did not recognize as knowing came up and took my hand and said: "You have been done an injustice, and some of us are going to try to correct it." As I stood there, aghast, he went on to say: "You have an irrefutable position, and something should be done."

Indeed, something was done, which no doubt amazed all who thought that the autonomy issue had been silenced—at least for the 1962 session! On the following day, the last day of the convention, the Rev. Robert E. Seymour, of Chapel Hill, regarded as a "liberal" among N. C. Baptists, offered before the body a resolution, asking that my remarks of the following day be received as relevant information, that the conclusiveness of the court decision be recognized (regrettably, he did not get to elaborate upon this point), and—most significantly—that the convention "look with disfavor on any future participation by the **leadership of the convention** in any litigation that may arise in the future such as the North Rocky Mount case" (a rather obvious blast at the leaders who had given court testimony!).

There was some confusion at the moment, and then the Rev. D. J. Abernathy, of Charlotte, moved that the matter be referred to the incoming Committee on Resolutions to be reported on at the next session of the convention, in 1963. Mr. John Simms moved that the matter be tabled. Unquestionably, the vote was very close; but the chair ruled that Mr. Simms' motion carried.

And so, after seemingly being buried one day, the autonomy issue was right back on the floor the next day—and without my saying a thing to the convention! By a narrow margin, the issue missed being on the official schedule for next year; and from the way so many messengers talked to me just after the convention adjourned (particularly by those of the supposed "liberal" faction), it seems likely that it will be up again this year. So, while in a way it was "the worst of times" for autonomy, there were yet indications—especially as the convention ended—that it was really "the best of times."

"The Baptist Program" Refuses To Give Other Side of Rocky Mount

Editor W. C. Fields, of "The Baptist Program," refused to publish the following article, written as a reply to South-

western Professor R. A. Baker's article dealing with some recent court decisions considered in relation to Rocky Mount:

It is encouraging that our people have been alerted by Professor Robert A. Baker (in the October issue of *The Baptist Program*) to the dangers for church autonomy involved in recent court decisions in Illinois and Kansas. Regrettably, however, Professor Baker has not departed from his position of former years in regard to the famous North Rocky Mount Church case. And, evidently, his prestige has influenced North Carolina Baptists in their recent reconsideration of this case. The committee which had been appointed a year before to study the issue made its report to the 1962 North Carolina Baptist State Convention with explicit acknowledgement to Profes- Baker's article: the committee's position, which was supported by the Convention, was that the court decision in the Rocky Mount case has not endangered church autonomy.

Professor Baker claims that the theoretical basis for the Rocky Mount decision is such as to distinguish it fundamentally from the Illinois and Kansas cases. The decision of the North Carolina Supreme Court, according to Professor Baker, "was not based upon whether the North Rocky Mount Church remained in or withdrew from affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention and its related bodies;" that, indeed, this decision "was based only upon changes in the local church in fundamental usages, customs, doctrines, etc. **without reference to denominational affiliation."**

But let us look at the text of the decision. The court declared that "the true congregation . . . consists of . . . members of the congregation who adhere and submit to the characteristic doctrines, usages, customs and practices of this particular church, recognized and accepted by both factions of the congregation before the dissension between them arose." Six things were listed as having been done by the majority:

"One. They have ceased to participate in the general programs and activities of the Roanoke Baptist Association, the North Carolina Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention, and have withdrawn their financial support of these agencies and institutions in their Co-operative Program, except support of the Baptist Orphanage, contrary to what the North Rocky Mount Missionary Baptist Church did before the dissension in the congregation arose.

"Two. They have resolved that the North Rocky Mount Missionary Baptist Church, after such cessation of affiliation with the local, State and Southern associations, shall continue its ministry in the community as an Independent Baptist Church.

"Three. They have stopped the use of Sunday School and Religious Literature prepared and approved by the Southern Baptist Convention, and are using Sunday School and Religious Literature prepared and published by the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, an association, which, according to the testimony of Dr. R. T. Ketcham, its national representative and editor of its official organ, holds to the view of premillennialism, and that the millennial question has been made a test of fellowship. This is contrary to what the North Rocky Mount Missionary Baptist Church did before the dispute in the congregation arose.

"Four. The Board of Deacons have approved and agreed that the Rev. Samuel H. W. Johnston shall have exclusive control of the pulpit, with power to say who shall, and who shall not, occupy the same, contrary to the custom and practice of this particular church before the dissension began.

"Five. They have discharged several of the North Rocky Mount Missionary Baptist Church officers and Sunday School teachers for the reason they opposed and voted against the Resolution adopted on 9 August 1953 by an affirmative vote of 241 members against a negative vote of 144, with 200 abstaining from voting, out of an enrolled membership of approximately 1,300 persons.

"*Six.* The Rev. Samuel H. W. Johnston has done all he could to separate himself as far as possible from the programs of the North Carolina State Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention, until such time as certain things he called 'evils' are rectified."

It should be obvious from this enumeration of the changes brought about by the majority that the court's decision was NOT based "only upon changes in the local church . . . **without reference to denominational affiliation.**" Actually, just what did the majority do in all these several acts except to **implement their decision** to leave the State and Southern Conventions? —with the possible exception of the minister's being approved to have control of the pulpit (which is something that the deacons would certainly have a right to propose and the congregation to adopt).

Concerning these six things, the legal publication of the University of North Carolina has said: "all that the majority did was implement their decision to leave the North Carolina and Southern Baptist Conventions." As this publication, *The North Carolina Law Review,* went on to say:

> "The cessation of literature and financial support to those Conventions flowed naturally and proximately from the decision to disaffiliate. The release of employees who did not believe or teach what the majority thought, was within the prerogative of any employer."

As to the church's adoption of literature teaching the premillennial doctrine, the *Duke Bar Journal* has observed: "The court neglected to consider that a majority in any Baptist Church is free to choose between premillennialism and postmillennialism, and that the churches in the Southern Baptist Convention are, in fact, widely split on this question." Certainly, it is a severe restriction on autonomy, as it has characteristically been understood by Baptists, for churches to be bound to particular doctrinal interpretations which they might like to change. As expressed by the 1925 Southern Baptsit Convention, in its preface to certain articles of faith which were then adopted:

> ". . . we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future, Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time."

The logical extreme of this decision, as it has been well stated by the *Duke Bar Journal,* "would result in the civil courts usurping from the majority in independent churches the determination of what are their fundamental religious beliefs."

Happily, there have been significant voices of opposition to this decision within Southern Baptist ranks; most notably, perhaps, from Virginia's *Religious Herald,* which has said:

> "If the decision of the North Carolina courts stand without protest by the Southern Baptist Convention, the future security of the churches will be seriously impaired.
>
> . . . The autonomy of every Baptist church in the Convention is in danger."

Nor should we forget that, unlike the Illinois and Kansas cases, the Rocky Mount decision dealt with a church affiliated with the **Southern Baptist Convention.** Actually, therefore, this decision is more relevant than any other in regard to the question of the autonomy of Southern Baptist churches.